DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 070 079 CS 200 247

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TITLE	Syntactical Speech Patterns of Black Children from a Depressed Urban Area: Educators Look at Linguistic Findings.
PUB DATE	29 Nov 72
NOTE	27p.; Unpublished research study
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	*Elementary Grades; Language Patterns; Linguistic Performance; *Negro Dialects; *Nonstandard Dialects; *Oral Expression; Sentence Structure; *Standard Spoken Usage; Urban Studies
IDENTIFIERS	Baratz (Joan)

ABSTRACT

The syntactical speech characteristics of black children living in depressed areas of an Eastern city were compared with the eight identified by Baratz, i.e., absence of "s" in the third person singular, zero copula, double negation and "ain't," zero past marker, zero possessive marker, zero plural marker, the substitution of "did" or "can" for the "if" expression of option or condition, and the use of "be" in a temporal sense. Oral language samples were obtained during individual interviews from three groups of children: intermediate low achievers, intermediate average achievers, and kindergarteners. The children were asked to tell a story about a picture which showed a boy and girl in an urban neighborhood staring at several bags of groceries lying scattered in the street. Tape recordings were made and analyzed with the results supporting the following conclusions: (1) more standard than divergent syntax was produced; (2) intermediate average achievers produced a greater amount of standard usage; (3) all of the characteristics identified by Baratz were produced; (4) a number of individuals with the low and average achieving groups used all standard speech, with no individuals using all divergent speech; and (5) the trend was toward mixed and standard usage. (HS)

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ED 070079

SYNTACTICAL SPEECH PATTERNS OF BLACK CHILDREN FROM A DEPRESSED URBAN AREA: EDUCATORS LOOK AT LINGUISTIC FINDINGS

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November 29, 1972

CS 200 247

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Syntactical Speech Patterns of Black Children From a Depressed Urban Area: Educators Look at Linguistic Findings

Should children in lower socio-economic areas whose speech is categorized as nonstandard or divergent English be taught with materials which most closely approximate the language associated with their environment? Although there are many reports in current educational literature (Baratz and Shuy, 1969; Fasold and Shuy, 1970) suggesting that the linguistic system of divergent English speaking black children presumably provides interference when they try to use standard English, -- that which is recognized as "correct" by the educated majority -- there is disagreement about the implications for instruction (Venezky, 1970, 340-42). The investigators initiated this study in order to propose and implement some instructional decisions regarding this problem.

In a recent study Baratz (1969) assessed the ability of children to repeat nonstandard, or divergent English structures possessing the following characteristics: (1) absence of the "s" in the third person singular, present tense; (2) zero copula; (3) double negation and ain't; (4) substitution of did or can for the "if" expression of option or condition; (5) zero past marker; (6) zero possessive marker; (7) zero plural marker; and (8) use of "be" in a temporal sense (See Appendix A). She found that black lower-socio-economic level children were superior to white middle

class children in the ability to reproduce these structures orally. This was taken as evidence that the black children had learned a different, though systematic, language code than their white counterparts. Baratz also compared the performance of black and white children with the following standard structures: (1) third person singular; (2) presence of copula; (3) treatment of negation; (4) if-did; (5) past marker; (6) possessive marker; and (7) plural marker. (There is no standard counterpart for the use of "be" in a temporal sense.) She concluded, as a result of the inferior performance of black children on repeating the standard constructions, that they were generally not bidialectal. This served as her justification later for advocating and promoting the use of "transition readers" written in their dialect to help divergent English speaking children in initial reading activities (Baratz and Shuy, 1969, 119). She did suggest, however, "that language assessment of disadvantaged Negro children must involve measures of their knowledge of non-standard English as well as additional measures of their knowledge of standard English" (Baratz, 1969, 889).

Labov (1965) had noted in his dialect study of the lower Eastside of New York City that most of his informants were able to detect divergent forms in the speech of others even though they used these forms themselves. DeStefano (1972) reported a study in which black children who spoke divergent English were able to use an increasingly larger number of

standard forms within the school setting as they progressed through the grades. Pope (1971) found that black and white children in his study generated the same range of syntactic structures. Golub (1972) even identified similar deviations from standard English in the spoken and written language of the black and white fourth- and fifth-graders in his study. The study which is reported here grows out of a search to acquire additional data in support of these findings.

If there is evidence that black speakers of divergent English are indeed bidialectal, having available resources of standard English as well as divergent English, then they may just as well be taught with materials written in the prestige dialect even though it might be necessary to "modify the content and vocabulary of standard English materials to better reflect the environment of the child ..." (Venezky, 1970, 340). This point of view is expressed by one writer (Jovanovich, 1971-72, 46) in this way:

> It is repeatedly suggested that black children should be provided with books that imitate street language: for example, "My grandmother she cook greens" - this being a sentence I found in a primer that was experimentally used in a Chicago school. Most black educators agree that presenting such usage to children is quite useless. A child who can read that sentence will also be able to read, "My grandmother cooks greens", and if he is confronted with such writing he will be affronted.

Kenneth Goodman (1965, 858) has also commented about the need for reckoning with the opposition of parents to the use of special reading materials based upon the nonprestigious divergent dialect.

The investigators are seeking ultimately to determine if black children who speak nonstandard, or divergent English can respond to standard English materials as well as to divergent English ones. Assessment of nonstandard or divergent characteristics is limited to those which are associated in the Baratz study with black economically disadvantaged children. The study is being undertaken in several stages, the first of which is described in this report. The investigators acknowledge that their status as educators rather than professional linguists may impose some limitations on their interpretation of the syntactical characteristics around which this study is centered. However, they also feel that their efforts are reflective of the obligation which educators have for interpreting linguistic findings and determining how to utilize and apply them in the classroom.

Purpose

The purpose of this first stage of the study was to compare the syntactical speech characteristics of selected groups of black elementary grade children in depressed areas of an Eastern city with those characteristics identified by Baratz. Groups of children selected for the study included kindergarteners, and low achievers and average achievers from intermediate grades three to six. The following questions were considered:

1. To what extent do these groups produce divergent and standard speech?

2. Are there differences between these groups in their production of divergent and standard speech?
3. To what extent do these groups produce specific divergent and standard syntactical speech characteristics?
4. To what extent do individuals within these groups produce divergent and standard speech?
5. To what extent do individuals within these groups produce specific divergent and standard syntactical speech characteristics consistently?

Sample

Teachers of third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grade children in four schools situated in depressed areas of the city were asked to select two groups of children. Group A consisted of black children whom the teachers categorized as speakers of nonstandard, or divergent, English, who were imaginative and verbal and who were low achievers in reading. Group B also consisted of black children whom the teachers categorized as speakers of nonstandard, or divergent, English, who were imaginative and verbal but who were average achievers in reading. The need for pupils in these categories who would be verbal in a school situation with unfamiliar adults limited the numbers of subjects available for the study in these schools. Then too, within the particular population studied more subjects were available who were low achievers in reading than subjects

who were average or high achievers in reading. There were forty-three pupils in the low achieving Group A and twenty pupils in the average achieving Group B. The mean reading score of the low achievers was at the nineteenth percentile; that of the average achievers was at the forty-eighth percentile for large city norms. In order to compare children's language performances at the beginning of their school experiences and later after undergoing the effects of formal instruction, kindergarten teachers in three of the schools were asked to identify several verbal, responsive children in their classes. There were fifteen children in this group which comprised Group C in the study.

Procedure

An oral language sample from each child was obtained during an individual interview. Each child was asked to tell a story about a picture (one of a series in Shaftel and Shaftel, 1967) which was presented to him showing a boy and a girl in an urban neighborhood staring at several bags of scattered groceries lying in the street. The examiner gave a brief introductory statement:

> I want to see how good an imagination you have. This is a picture of a little boy and girl who have been sent to the store by their mother to buy groceries for dinner. Tell a story about what happened.

A tape recording was made of the story which resulted. The examiner was allowed a maximum of three stimulations or verbal

prompts: (1) "Tell me more."; (2) "What do you think will happen next?"; and (3) "If that were you, what would you do?" The tapes were transcribed by a typist. The typescripts were crosschecked against the tape recording by the examiners and corrected, if necessary. These were retyped and then analyzed.

Analysis included the marking of all of the syntactical speech characteristics cited by Baratz. These characteristics formed the definitions for the divergent and standard speech categories used in this study. A number was assigned to each of the eight divergent speech characteristics and its standard counterpart.* These numbers were used by the examiner, who obtained the sample, for coding the typescript. The child's commentary was then marked according to the category, divergent or standard. Within the context of the typescript each standard instance was underlined and each divergent one was encircled. A section of a typescript is shown in order to illustrate how the coding and analysis were accomplished:

Standard Divergent

2 This picture <u>is</u> gonna** show about two little children dropped***

* See Appendix A
** Syntactical characteristics only were coded - not phonological ones.
***See Appendix A, characteristic 5, for the reason that "dropped" was not marked.

7 their bags. They had just come from a food store going to the store for their mother. They dropped the

5 bag and waste the eggs and spilt the milk all 5

2 over the place. When they get home they're gonna get it. They don't have no money to 3 go back and

2 get some more food. The eggs are cracked, the bread

2, 2 is all over the street, the milk is running down the gutter.

An utterance was labeled as nonstandard or standard only when actual use pointed to its character.**** This decision eliminated much potential data from the study since so much of the meaning and substance of spontaneous speech is implied rather than overtly stated. Agreement was also reached by the investigators on guidelines for interpreting the speech characteristics.*

All of the coded and analyzed typescripts were checked and double checked by the two investigators and by a third, disinterested person. Frequencies of total instances and sub-totals of divergent and standard responses were calculated for each group. These were the raw data which were trans-

* See Appendix A
****See Appendix A, Characteristic 3, for examples.

generated into total and specific instances of divergent and standard characteristics per hundred words of speech. Means and other data were obtained for each of the three groups included in the study.

Results

The data obtained from the speech samples are arranged in the four tables which accompany this study.

Table I shows how many instances of divergent and standard speech characteristics, as defined in this study, were noted in the three groups reported in the study. Mean scores transgenerated per 100 words are shown. Each group had approximately the same number of opportunities to use divergent or standard syntax (7.9, 7.2, 7.6) per 100 words. Out of 7.9 opportunities, Group A, the intermediate low

TABLE I

Production of Divergent and Standard Speech By Groups Per 100 Words

Groups	Total Opportunities	Instances of Divergent		Instances of Standard	
		Subtotal	Percent of Total	Subtotal	Percent of Total
A-Intermediate, low achievers	7.9	2.9	37%	5.0	63%
B-Intermediate, average achievers	7.2	2.1	29%	5.1	71%
C-Kindergarteners	7.6	3.8	50%	3.8	50%

achievers, used divergent 2.9 times and standard syntax 5.0 times per 100 words. The intermediate average achievers, Group B, out of 7.2 opportunities used divergent 2.1 times and standard syntax

5.1 times per 100 words. Kindergarteners, Group C, used divergent 3.8 times and standard syntax 3.8 out of a total of 7.6 opportunities. In other words when opportunities arose to use a standard or divergent form, in 63% of the instances Group A, in 71% of the instances Group B, and in 50% of the instances Group C, used standard speech.

T tests were computed to determine whether there were differences between the groups in their production of divergent and standard speech. Group A scored significantly more divergent than Group B with t=4.36, significant at .05 level. Group A, low achievers, did not score significantly different than Group C, kindergarten, on divergent scores with t=1.45, not significant at .05 level.

Table II differs from Table I in that it shows production of the specific speech characteristics by the three groups. Among the three groups all of the divergent speech characteristics noted by Baratz were produced although Group B had no instances of the use of "be" in the temporal sense. Opportunities for the use of copula arose most frequently -- 3.4, 3.2, and 4.3, per 100 words in Groups A, B. and C respectively.

TABLE II

Production of Specific Divergent and Standard Syntactical Speech Characteristics by Groups Per 100 Words

Characteristics		GROUP A Low Achievers Opportunities Total - 7.9	Percent	GROUP B Average Achievers Opportunities Total - 7.2	Percent	GROUP C Kindergarteners Opportunities Total - 7.6	Percent
1 3rd. pers.	Total	.66		.09		.50	
	Div.		63%		100%		66%
	Stand.		37%		0%		33%
2 Copula	Total	3.40		3.20		4.30	
	Div.		30%		14%		55%
	Stand.		70%		86%		45%
3 Negation	Total	.35		.40		.15	
	Div.		70%		67%		80%
	Stand.		30%		33%		20%
4 If	Total	.42		.18		.07	
	Div.		33%		0%		43%
	Stand.		66%		100%		57%
5 Past	Total	2.00		2.30		2.00	
	Div.		28%		33%		39%
	Stand.		72%		67%		61%
6 Possessive	Total	.32		.14		.05	
	Div.		66%		50%		0%
	Stand.		33%		50%		100%
7 Plural	Total	.74		.89		.44	
	Div.		47%		33%		10%
	Stand.		53%		67%		90%
8 *"Be"	Total	.03		0		.13	
	Div.		100%		0%		100%
	Stand.				0%		

*"Be" used temporally has no standard syntactical counterpart

Seventy percent of the use of the copula in Group A and 86 percent of its use in Group B was standard. Forty-five percent of Group C's usage of this characteristic was standard. The next highest incidence of use was noted for the past marker. A pattern somewhat similar to the one for the use of the copula was observed in Groups A and B. The divergent use of the 3rd person singular -- 63% Group A, 100% Group B and 66% Group C -- and negation -- 70% Group A, 67% Group B and 80% Group C -- was apparent. Total opportunities to use the following characteristics per 100 words were: for the 3rd person singular, .66 Group A, .09 Group B, and .50 Group C; for negation, .35 Group A, .40 Group B, and .15 Group C per 100 words. "Be" (Charac. 8) represented the smallest frequency of use (.03 per 100 words) among Group A. Zero opportunities per 100 words were noted among Group B and .13 among Group C.

Tables I and II summarize the amount of divergent and standard speech of the three groups according to their overall production and by specific characteristics. Table III reports the distribution of individuals within the groups according to the standard and divergent syntactical speech categories. Three of the 43 low achievers, Group A; 5 of the 20 average achievers, Group B; and 1 of 15 kindergarteners, Group C evidenced all standard syntactical speech as defined in this study. An additional 4 of the 20 individuals in Group B used all standard syntactical speech except for one instance.

No student used all divergent speech in any group. Thirteen of the 43 Group A's, and 3 of the 20 Group B's evidenced more divergent than standard speech. For each group these figures

TABLE III

Production of Divergent and Standard Speech
By Individuals Within the Groups

Groups	Total in Group	Speech Categories				
		All Stand.	More Stand. than Div.	Evenly Divided	More Div. than Stand.	All Divergent
A-Interm., low achievers	43	3	25	2	13	0
B-Interm., average achievers	20	5*	12	0	3	0
C-Kindergarteners	15	1	5	2	7	0

*An additional four pupils used all standard speech characteristics except for one instance.

were smaller than for those who used as much or more standard speech. This also held true for Group C in which 7 of the 15 members used more divergent than standard speech.

Table IV illustrates the extent to which individuals within the groups studied -- low achievers, average achievers, and kindergarteners -- used specific divergent and standard syntactical speech characteristics consistently. The data show the number of individuals in each group who used each one of the specific characteristics in a divergent, standard, or

TABLE IV

Consistency of Use of Specific Divergent and Standard Syntactical Speech Characteristics By Individuals Within the Groups

Groups Speech Categories	Syntactical Speech Characteristics							
	1 3rd. pers.	2 Copula	3 Neg.	4 If	5 Past	6 Poss.	7 Plural	8 *"Be"
A-Inter., low achievers N=43								
1. No. of individuals	21	43	19	21	42	15	27	3
2. No. using all div.	8	1	12	4	2	7	4	3
3. No. using all stand.	3	13	5	12	14	5	8	0
4. No. using mixed	10	29	2	5	26	3	15	0
B-Inter., average achievers N=20								
1. No. of individuals	2	19	8	5	17	4	14	0
2. No. using all div.	2	0	5	0	0	2	3	0
3. No. using all stand.	0	11	2	5	11	2	9	0
4. No. using mixed	0	8	1	0	6	0	2	0
C-Kindergarteners N=15								
1. No. of individuals	6	15	3	2	11	1	6	2
2. No. using all div.	3	2	1	1	2	0	1	2
3. No. using all stand.	0	3	0	1	4	1	5	0
4. No. using mixed	3	10	2	0	5	0	0	0

*"Be" used temporally has no standard syntactical counterpart.

mixed manner. Row 1 under each group shows the total numbers of individuals who used each specific syntactical speech characteristic. Row 2 shows the numbers of individuals from the totals who used each specific syntactical speech characteristic consistently in a divergent manner. Row 3 shows the numbers of individuals from the totals who used each syntactical speech characteristic consistently in a standard manner. Row 4 shows the numbers of individuals from the totals who evidenced a mixture of standard and divergent usage.

If read by columns or characteristics, Table IV gives the following kinds of information: The data under Char. 1 show that 21 individuals in Group A used the 3rd person singular structure. Of these, 8 used all divergent, 3 used all standard, and 10 used a mixture of divergent and standard syntactical speech forms. Within that same group, 29 out of 43 individuals used mixed forms of the copula (Char. 2); 26 out of 42 used mixed forms of the past marker (Char. 5). However, as can be noted, among Group B, 11 out of 19 used standard forms of the copula (Char. 2) consistently and 11 out of 17 used standard forms of the past marker (Char. 5) consistently. A comparison of performance on negation (Char. 3) shows a similarity with 12 out of 19 Group A's and 5 out of 8 Group B's using all divergent structures. Among Group C's, however 1 out of 3 individuals who used negation evidenced all divergent structures. The other 2 used a mixture of standard and divergent forms.

Conclusions

Both the low achieving Group A and the average achieving Group B produced more instances of standard than divergent usage. About 60 percent of the instances of the syntactical structures observed in the speech of Group A were in the standard category; over 70 percent of the instances observed in the speech of Group B were standard. The usage was equally distributed between divergent and standard within Group C, the kindergarteners.

There was a significant difference in the production of standard speech by the intermediate low achievers and average achievers observed in this study. Furthermore, the evidence was clear, that the combined scores of the three groups, A, B, and C, in this study, revealed that they produced more standard than divergent forms within the school setting.

In all three groups the most frequent opportunities for usage arose for copula and past marker. For these characteristics, standard usage was more frequent than divergent. The only areas of more divergent than standard usage for all three groups were 3rd person singular and negation. In both cases, however, relatively few opportunities for use arose. It was of interest to note that in the total population observed "be" in the temporal sense, which is closely associated with black nonstandard or divergent

dialect, appeared less frequently than any of the eight characteristics.

The importance of looking at individual speech production within the groups was highlighted by the variety of usage patterns noted. Speech categories employed by individuals ranged from all standard to more divergent than standard in each group. No individual used all divergent speech.

A similar lack of consistency was noted in individual production of the specific speech characteristics. With the exception of "be" in the temporal sense, which has no standard counterpart, no syntactical speech characteristic, standard or divergent, was used consistently in a particular category by all individuals in any of the groups observed. The tendency was toward mixed and standard usage with the exception of negation (Char. 3) which a greater proportion of individuals used divergently.

Implications

The reader of this study is reminded that the findings must be viewed in terms of its limitations: the groups were assessed on syntactical instances only; the nature of the populations did not allow for random assignment as numbers were restricted by the criteria of verbal ability, responsiveness and imagination which were applied. Generaliza-

tions are limited but there are some implications for further consideration, exploration, and inquiry:

About Children

The range of language patterns observed in these groups suggests that caution should be exercised in implying that children from different races, regions, or groups use specified syntactical characteristics in a consistent manner. Although it is in order that this study be replicated using larger numbers there are indications from this study that many black children in lower socio-economic areas tend to use standard or mixed syntactical forms to a greater extent than they use all-divergent language forms within school settings. Evidently educators should look toward use of standard reading materials as media of instruction with consideration for modifying their content and individualizing the child's approach to them.

The Instructional Program

The lack of consistency observed in patterns of language usage by individuals impose some limitations for prescribing generalized instructional guidelines. Classroom emphasis must depend upon an assessment of the individual members of the particular group involved. These individuals will vary in their use of standard and divergent structures

according to their particular competencies. Because individuals do vary widely in their competencies, commercially prepared materials containing divergent structures and intended for transitional reading activities would have to be used with caution and selectivity. Disadvantages, associated with assumptions that the populations for which they are intended have consistently divergent speech production, may outweigh any possible advantages. This consideration points strongly toward the use of an individualized language experience approach as a more appropriate transitional instructional mode.

There appeared to be a relationship between higher achievement in reading and standard usage. The lack of a significant difference in the use of standard English by the kindergarten children and the intermediate low achievers in reading as compared with the significant difference between the kindergarten children and the intermediate average achievers in reading arouses speculation about factors in the school situation which may affect learning. Further study is planned by the investigators in this area.

If the teacher is to work effectively with children then he must broaden his knowledge of their individual behaviors. Availing himself of linguistic findings is an important initial step in helping the teacher to listen appreciatively to what each child is saying and to make use

of these perceptions to formulate a language problem for him.

Obviously more study of ways to using this information is needed. In the meantime the investigators urge educators to apply their interpretations of the findings of the linguists to their own educational settings and to adapt them in accordance with the responses of their students.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to compare the syntactical speech characteristics of black children living in depressed areas of an Eastern city with those identified by Baratz. Three groups of children, Group A, intermediate low achievers, Group B, intermediate average achievers and Group C, kindergarteners, were selected. Oral language samples were taped and analyzed.

The data collected in this study support the following conclusions:

1. The population produced more standard than divergent syntax.
2. Intermediate average achievers produced a significantly greater amount of standard usage than the other two groups in the study.
3. All of the characteristics identified by Baratz were produced. However, those which appeared most frequently, copula and past marker, were predominantly standard in usage.

4. A number of individuals within the low and average achieving groups used all standard speech as defined in this study. No individual used all divergent speech.
5. Consistent use of specific speech characteristics by individuals varied considerably with a large number favoring standard use of the copula and past marker and a comparably large number favoring the divergent use of the double negative. The trend was toward mixed and standard usage.

There is a clear indication from this study that a need exists to accept children as individuals, to avoid overgeneralizing and to accept their diversity rather than to attribute specific characteristics to them as a group. This is a prime condition for promoting personalized instruction and for maximizing learning potential.

Appendix A

Guide for Interpreting Speech Characteristics

The following characteristics are syntactic features of Negro nonstandard, or divergent, speech as identified by Baratz. For the purposes of the present study these were interpreted as shown:

*1. Absence of the "S" in the third person singular, present tense

example: His father work in the store.

2. Zero Copula

There is no link between a subject and its direct object.

example: He a bad boy.

There is no link between a subject and participle or a subject and its modifier in the predicate.

examples: She going to the movies.

John sad because he dropped the bottle.

3. Double negation and ain't

Evidence must be present of actual use.

examples: He didn't see no car.

She ain't seen nobody.

4. Substitution of "did" or "can" for the "if" expression of choice or a possible action

examples: See can your mother did anything about it.

I asked him did he see the man.

5. Zero past marker

Consideration was limited to absence of ed, t, or d affixes to regular forms of verbs where stem or other morphological changes do not occur in the past tense. Forms such as kept, spilt, meant, said, and sent were coded as standard. Not coded were words in which stem or morphological changes occur in the past tense such as: thought, saw, went and told. Some endings are naturally elided in standard linguistic discourse. For example in the sentence, "He dropped the ball" the "d" ending is generally elided before a word beginning with a consonant. However, in the sentence, "He dropped it" the "d" ending is generally linked with the vowel at the beginning of the following word. Consequently, in analyzing the speech samples the identification of the presence or absence of the past marker was considered feasible only if it:

a. occurred before a natural pause or juncture in the linguistic unit (as in "Mother shall get mad at us and we shall be punish(ed).")

b. preceded a word beginning with a vowel or an unvoiced "h" (as in "He clean(ed) up the mess" or "She push(ed) him.")

c. was an inflection in the form of a stressed syllable (as in "He waste(ed) the milk.")

6. Zero possessive marker

example: They lost their mother money.

7. Zero plural marker

Only these allomorphs of s-- s, es -- were counted. Not counted was "en" as in children or "ee" as in teeth.

A distinction was made between collective and individual possession of some referents expressed in singular form:

examples: Standard forms: their mother, their house, their food, their bicycle

Nonstandard or divergent forms: their hand, their mind

8. Use of "be" in a temporal sense

There is no standard counterpart to this use of "be" to mean an acting upon or acting out of a situation in which an element of time is involved.

examples: He be working. (He has a regular job to which he reports or which he performs regularly.)

He <u>been</u> working. (He has been on the job a <u>long</u> time.) Then I be minding my own business going down the street and some boys trying to come mess with me. (This use refers to an activity or condition within a given time and space segment.)

*These numbers were the sources of the numerical codes used for marking the typescripts.

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